Would you rather live in 'Tea Prairie?'

The name Washougal is supposed to come from the Indian for "rushing water," according to James W. Phillips, author of "Washington Place Names."

The first written use of the word was by Alexander Ross, one of three men in the Astor fur trading company who made a trip upriver in 1811. He wrote that they "staid for the night at Washough-ally Camp." It should be remembered that Indian words were very gutteral, and writers often had problems reducing them to writing.

"Tea Prairie" was another name given to the handsome prairie where Washougal is now located. This was for the peppermint that grew in great abundance and from which the French-Canadian trappers and voyageurs made a tasty tea. In French it was spelled "La Prairie du The, "with an accent over the last "e."

Nathaniel J. Wyeth, another early American traveler, described the prairie in 1832, as "about three miles long, and through it is a small creek

which enters the Columbia." At one time, he considered establishing a fort here, probably as a competitor of Hudson's Bay Co., because Wyeth hoped to wrest some of the fur trade from the Englishmen. He never succeeded in this.

In 1836, the Rev. Samuel Parker, who preceded Dr. Marcus Whitman in a survey of the mission field among the Indians, wrote these glowing words:

"This is a rich and beautiful prairie of some miles in circumference, and at this early part of the spring was covered by a fresh coat of grass five or six inches high. A little back from the river there is a beautiful lake (LaCamas Lake?), the resort of water-fowl, which are seen exhibiting their unsullied plumage; and in the rear are forests of fir, whither the deer which crop the grass of the prairie flee when they see man ascend the river's bank."

The townsite of Camas missed these complimentary descriptions because it was mostly forest. Camas took its name for the small blue lily which grew in the open

fields above and west of the town, and which the Indians sought for its tasty bulb. It was harvested in mid-summer and was cooked in baking pits, first being wrapped in swamp grass before coming in contact with the hot stones. When dry, it could be made into a course flower from which a kind of bread was made.

Camas or Kamass, as it was sometimes spelled, was second only to the wappato or arrowhead bulb which was harvested from shallow parts of Columbia River sloughs. An Indian legend

told that the Camas bulb originally grew in heaven. But Coyote, the Indian deity, decided his mortal children should enjoy it before they died, so he brought the bulbs down to earth.

The first name of Camas was LaCamas, which is French for "The Camas." It was probably taken from the nearby lake and creek of the same name because Henry L. Pittock, publisher of the Oregonian, and his associates decided to locate their mill here to utilize the water from the lake. The lake and creek were named

LEWIS AND CLARK's account of their visit to the Columbia River area included descriptions of Indian women gathering wappato root on Wappato, or Sauvie, Island —From "Wappato Indians," by the late Roy F. Jones.

before the town was conceived, because the latter flowed through large fields of the Camas flowers.

Somewhere along the line, the name of the creek and lake was corrupted to "Lackamas," probably by a semi-literate map maker or public official in the court house. Early American pioneers have corrupted many other geographical names, even to our county's name itself (see story elsewhere on "Clarke" County).

However, as late as 1883, a military map prepared under the supervision of Lt. George Goethals at Vancouver Barracks, spelled the two bodies of water correctly as LaCamas. (Goethals one of the early U.S. Engineers in this area, won fame later as the builder of the Panama Canal.)

Later on, the "La" was dropped from the town's name, as related elsewhere. Whatever the origin of the names, the Camas-Washougal area was recognized by early explorers and pioneers as an enchanting part of the Columbia River.

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Fern Prairie's history dates back to 1852, when D. C. Parker and his son, James Parker, arrived in the area and located their land claim the following year.

Lewis Van Vleet was the next settler, coming in 1855. After this arrival, the area's settlement changed so quickly that no accurate records were kept of the movements of families.

The first school in the locality was opened in May, 1863, with Miss Lucy Knight as teacher. It was a log hut that occupied the present site of the Methodist Church building.

As long ago as 1857 there was a Methodist Church in the Fern Prairie area. Services were held in the different schoolhouses until the completion of the church building in 1884.

"The Illustrated History of Clark County" calls Fern Prairie "one of the most

beautiful spots in the county, famed for its lakes of which there are three, the upper being entirely disconnected with the two others by any stream or armlet." Flowing from the southernmost of the lakes in LaCamas creek, which finds its way into the Columbia River. These three lakes are now known as Round, Dead and Lackamas Lakes.

On Lackamas Lake, David C. Parker and William Ryan erected a sawmill in 1846 for Jacob Hunsaker. The mill had only one saw — upright and seven feet long — and the logs used to make the lumber were cut in the vicinity and rolled to the logway with hand spikes.

The next mill to be built in the area was by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1851. It burned to the ground the following year. H.J.G. Maxon built another that year, but it also was destroyed by fire. —M.A.
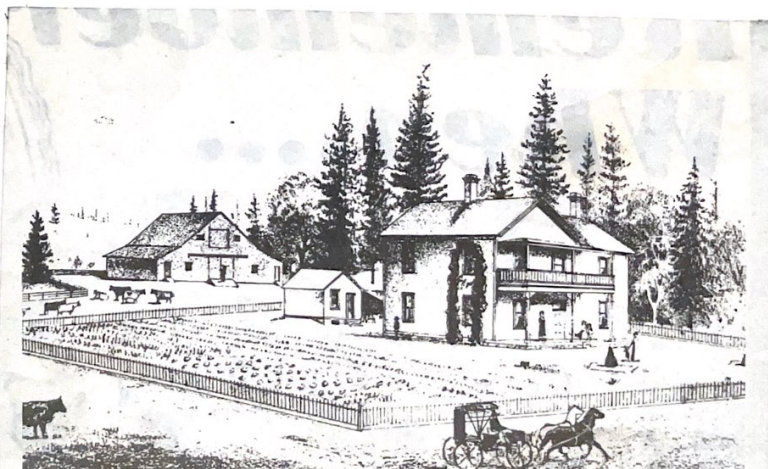
THE HOME OF MASON M. GIBBONS east of Washougal as it looked to the artist of this drawing, made about 1885. Gibbons came to the area with his father, Joseph, in 1847 and settled on a donation land claim on Gibbons Creek.